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Research Associate Report

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Raising the bar

What do successful secondary subject leaders leading large teams do to raise attainment in their curriculum areas?

Autumn 2006

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Introduction

This study is based on the views of over 40 secondary subject leaders of English, Maths and Science, each of whom have led departments that have initiated and sustained improvement in academic standards over three to five years at GCSE level. Its focus was to explore the question 'What do successful secondary subject leaders leading large teams do to raise attainment in their curriculum areas?'. The study focused on the subject leaders of these subjects as they usually constitute the largest curriculum teams in schools and, as core subjects, they are increasingly a key focus of attention.

The demands placed on leaders in schools, at all levels, have become greater as the culture of accountability has developed in the past two decades. School leaders must now work towards numerous targets and the public examination results are subject to scrutiny by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and local authorities. Results are set in a context that includes school groups, prior attainment, residual progress, boy/girl attainment and attainment of ethnic groups. In response to this focus on improving attainment, the need for department teams to improve results in public examinations is heightened. The key individual responsible for these teams is the head of department or, as referred to in this study, the subject leader.

Literature review

The characteristics of leadership in schools have received much attention. A number of theories and terms have been coined, applied, discussed, scrutinised and re-defined. Although the perspectives lead to sometimes different conclusions they all attempt to bring some order to what is a complex role in an equally complex and challenging environment.

The discussion of literature below is not exhaustive by any means; however reference to the studies provides a way of articulating the experiences of the subject leaders who attended the focus groups with some common terms. They also link to some of the main themes that arose from both the focus group discussions and analysis of the questionnaires.

Leithwood et al (1999) outline seven major approaches to leadership, which are given the terms:

1. Managerial (efficient completion of tasks)
2. Contingent (responding to challenges)
3. Instructional (enhancing teachers' classroom practice)
4. Transactional (exchange of services for rewards such as salaries, recognition and intrinsic rewards)
5. Moral (increasing the effectiveness of staff by involving them in decision making)
6. Transformational (changing practice)
7. Participative (involving others in decision making).

These approaches are defined as being 'instrumental' by Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998), that is, where leaders attempt to influence teachers to achieve goals outlined by the organisation.

Transformational and participative leadership styles demand that formal leaders involve a wide range of groups in the decision-making process. Leithwood et al (1999) argue that transformational leadership results in deeper levels of change and development in

schools. These leadership styles are characterised by collaboration, empowerment and problem solving. Fink (in Coles and Southworth 2005: 5) states:

... transformational and participative [leadership styles] – are intended to involve people in organisations in decisions that will increase the organisation’s capacity to improve and respond to changes in its context.

One of the key themes that link these leadership strategies is the need to achieve goals and to unite teams into a “meaningful course of action” (Gron 1996, in Coles and Southworth 2005: 3). This is critically important for subject leaders, as they have to unite individuals who have different skill levels, areas of expertise and background. Diversity is not necessarily restricted to larger departments but the potential for variation as a result of dealing with larger groups of individuals is arguably greater.

Alma Harris and Daniel Muijs (2005: 37) explore a number of concepts that also emerged throughout the course of this research. They argue, “Successful school improvement is dependent upon the ability of individual schools to manage and change development”. A major part of this is “modifying classroom practice” (Hopkins 2001, in Harris and Muijs 2005: 37); in other words influencing what individual teachers do in their classrooms. Harris and Muijs (2005: 37) use the terms ‘building capacity’ or ‘capacity building’ to describe the processes by which schools create “... the conditions, opportunities and experiences for development and mutual learning”. Therefore, long-term school improvement is a collaborative process that places a high priority on the personal and professional development of all individuals within that community. They go on to state:

Of central importance in building learning capacity within organisations is the human perspective. By placing teachers at the centre stage for development, there is a greater opportunity for organisational growth. Building the capacity for improvement means extending the capabilities of teachers to lead and work collaboratively. (Harris and Muijs 2005: 38)

A key idea here is placing the developmental needs of teachers as a priority and ensuring that the organisation builds their levels of skill to become more effective practitioners. The relevance of this concept for a subject leader is the need to ensure that each member of their team has opportunities to increase their levels of knowledge, skill and confidence. This is not always easy to achieve in a busy school environment where financial and time constraints appear to mitigate against such a powerful ideal.

The notion of creating professional learning communities emerges from this concept of building capacity. Sergiovanni (2000) suggests developing a community of practice as potentially the most powerful route to securing school improvement. Harris and Muijs (2005: 48), in their review of the latest research into learning communities, suggest that there are no universal template characteristics that adequately describe the range of learning communities that exist. The reason for this is that learning communities evolve and adapt to local conditions. However, the work of many commentators suggests that the quality of personal relationships is vital for the building of successful learning communities. They also state that a variety of studies have made clear links between the development of learning communities that lead to “deep teacher change” (Harris and Muijs 2005: 49) and ultimately a rise in standards.

The concept of learning communities highlights the need for subject leaders to promote and encourage a focus on teaching and learning within their teams as well as

developing and sustaining supportive working relationships with their close colleagues. In addition to providing a positive and enjoyable working environment, subject leaders have to find ways to evaluate and ultimately change teacher behaviour, which is not always as straightforward as it sounds.

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified a number of qualities that need to exist for a productive learning community. Primarily, the learning community needed to develop a willingness to accept feedback and implement improvement. In addition: the presence of trust and respect among colleagues; possessing the necessary skill areas; supportive leadership; and a “relatively intensive socialization process” (Harris and Muijs 2005: 52). Harris and Muijs also outline some necessary features for a professional learning community. Although these have been applied to schools rather than departments, there are features that need to exist strongly in both. They include:

- the sharing of authority and power by the leader
- participation in decision making
- a shared vision that focuses on student learning
- collective learning among staff to address students’ needs
- review and evaluation of work, including peer assessment
- the physical conditions and human capacities to support the work of the team.

Finally, the concepts of learning-centred leadership and distributed leadership have come to the fore through research conducted by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Distributed leadership defines the practice of sharing leadership across an organisation and developing all community members as leaders. Inherent in the idea is the commitment to empower individuals to lead in a given context. Learning-centred leadership focuses on influencing the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms and promotes a ‘can do’ improvement culture. NCSL (2004a, 2004b) suggest that successful learning-centred leaders understand how to influence others through indirect influences. In NCSL (2004b), Southworth states that the strategies of modelling behaviour, monitoring and evaluation and dialogue are used in an interrelated way. Modelling is concerned with the power of example; it includes analysing and acting on student data and dialogue, creating opportunities for teachers to discuss and come to a shared understanding of their work. In addition, Southworth argues that successful leaders use a number of systems and structures. These include planning processes, target setting, communication systems and monitoring systems. In the course of this study it became apparent that these strategies, systems and structures did form an important part of the subject leaders’ work, although they did not use these terms as defined by Southworth.

Another common element of recent research and writing on subject leadership is the recognition of the following factors.

First, the pivotal and influential role that subject leaders play in raising attainment of students: “the driving force behind any school ... the key to improving the quality of the learning process” (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell 1989, in Kydd et al 2003: 185). Additionally, “Team leaders have a powerful influence over classroom practices and are important gatekeepers to change and development within their subject areas.... The overall purpose of the subject leader’s role is to contribute to school improvement and increased standards of performance through the provision of high-quality teaching within the subject area” (Harris and Muijs 2005: 19).

Second, the nature of a subject leader's role has become more complex and demanding. Before the publication of the *National Standards for Subject Leaders* by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in 1998, subject leaders might have safely assumed that their role consisted of a number of managerial tasks rather than those associated with leadership. Ordering resources, creating the department timetable, sorting out the consumables order and keeping the stock cupboard tidy were all activities that had previously consumed subject leaders. The present expectation is vastly different. Subject leaders are now expected to:

- provide clear goals and visions for their teams
- create detailed action plans on how to achieve them
- evaluate the performance of their colleagues on a regular basis
- evaluate the impact of INSET
- evaluate the performance of the students in their subject areas
- keep informed of changes to syllabus requirements, new government initiatives and implementing school policy.

Some of these areas might have been conducted by some subject leaders in the past; now it is the expectation that all subject leaders carry out these responsibilities as well as demonstrating leadership of their teams. Subject leaders of large departments have additional challenges to cope with on a daily and long-term basis. Subject leaders of English, Maths and Science in large secondary schools have to lead large teams, usually of more than 10 members. To ensure that standards of attainment are met and improved, subject leaders in these areas have to ensure consistency of practice.

Themes that emerged in this study

There are a number of common themes that emerge from this research that are relevant to the work of subject leaders that contributed to this study:

- Creating stable teams that work and learn together (learning communities).
- Involving colleagues in decision making.
- Understanding the reality of the situation and changing practice if necessary (use of feedback from monitoring and evaluation).
- Developing the skills of the team through the sharing of good practice.

What Ofsted said about the subject leaders' practice in the study schools

Part of this study included a review of the Ofsted reports of the departments and schools identified for this research. The purpose of the review was to use the observations of the inspectors as an alternative perspective to those drawn from the review of current research. In addition, reviewing the reports of these successful departments might highlight some patterns of activity that the subject leaders did not recognise themselves. In some cases, the most recent reports did not cover the same time period as the data collection and analysis conducted as part of this study.

In practical terms, Ofsted inspectors expect subject leaders to monitor, evaluate and scrutinise the work of their teams. They are also charged with the responsibility of effecting improvement and making changes when and where necessary. The need to develop a clear and accurate notion of the teams' performance is a prominent part of Ofsted's analysis and evaluation of a department's performance. In terms of inspection findings, there is a clear link between the quality of subject leadership and the quality of

teaching and learning. Not only do Ofsted reports comment on the standards of teaching and learning observed in lessons, they also devote considerable space to commenting on the monitoring and evaluation taking place in a subject area; the quality of student tracking; the use of assessment data; clarity of schemes of work; the sharing of good practice within the department; and the quality of leadership in the subject. Again, these areas of focus re-emphasise the core actions of a subject leader in secondary schools. Ofsted's view of what subject leaders should be doing tends to support those areas outlined by the TTA (1998) and current research.

The following statement is drawn from one of several Ofsted reports from the chosen departments and has been selected because it provides fairly typical conclusions drawn by inspectors on the impact that subject leaders have on standards within their respective subject areas.

English is well led by a subject leader who has helped the specialist team to share effective teaching methods and approaches, with a beneficial impact on pupils' work. The team has worked productively to identify ways to raise pupils' attainment, for example, by changing the content covered in the GCSE course. (Ofsted report 103003, January 2002)

The above statement highlights some important themes that emerge in many of the reports of the selected departments. The first is the notion of teamwork that provides a foundation and an impetus to support and sustain the changes needed to raise standards. Second, there is the recognition of the importance of teams sharing good practice. This statement makes an explicit link between the actions of the subject leader and the development of sharing ideas in the phrase "the team has worked productively". Many reports reflect this sentiment that the subject leader is a critical agent in encouraging individual members of a team to share successful strategies. This idea of collaborative working was one that emerged strongly in the focus group interviews. The statement also touches on the idea of the importance of team planning. The subject leaders in the focus group all mentioned the very positive impact that careful team planning had on delivering the curriculum and the numerous comments in Ofsted reports reflect this. Finally, the reference to "changing the content" of a course reflects another strong characteristic of the subject leaders interviewed in the focus groups – the ability to respond to the needs of the students if the delivery of the curriculum was not working. Implicit in this concept of meeting the needs of the students is the ability to evaluate and reflect and the ability to take others through the same process.

Another aspect of subject leaders' work is reflected in the following statement:

The head of department sets a very good example as a teacher. His high aspirations for the students and, therefore, for his colleagues have a positive impact on the work of his team and so influence the standards achieved by the students. (Ofsted report 118786, January 2005)

The idea of setting a 'good example' also emerges frequently in other reports and suggests that Ofsted inspectors at least feel that the physical embodiment of a positive ethos by the subject leader is an important influence on the team. The idea of being a 'good example' was qualified by the focus groups and will be discussed at greater length later. In addition to this, the above statement also highlights another very dynamic influence, that of expectations. As well as expecting teachers and students to achieve their potential, the idea of high expectation embodies a strong belief held by all these subject leaders that teachers can make a difference to students' attainment, regardless

of circumstance and prior attainment. This does not mean to say that the subject leaders held a naive idea of the challenges involved in their work. All exhibited a strong grip on reality but despite challenges, they all aimed to make a positive impact on the students they and their teams taught. The observations made in the Ofsted reports concerning the power of professional example link to the concept of modelling behaviour defined by NCSL (2004a).

Added to these pressures; the performance of teams in secondary schools are coming under greater scrutiny as public examination results are analysed with increasing rigour to measure absolute and value added performance. Therefore, subject leaders in secondary schools are the key group responsible for ensuring that their teams deliver public examination results that meet and exceed targets set by school leadership groups and local authorities. This focus on a limited definition causes some tension for subject leaders who often want to deliver their respective subjects in innovative and creative ways. From those who attended the focus groups, many had accepted, as a necessary reality, the need to train their teams to train the students to achieve in public examinations. Many voiced regret that this tended to make establishing dynamic forms of teaching and learning difficult; particularly the new holy grail of teaching for personalised learning.

Methods

The sample was drawn from three local authorities: Bromley, Sutton and Kent. In the cases of Bromley and Kent, the Research and Statistics Departments of both authorities were contacted and asked to identify schools or departments that had achieved three to five years' consecutive improvement at GCSE A*-C grades. In the case of the Sutton sample, the heads of English from the borough were invited as all departments had shown consistent improvement for the past three to five years.

The data identified 42 subject leaders from 27 different schools in Kent and 12 subject leaders from 4 different Bromley schools. Seven subject leaders of English were identified by the English inspector for Sutton as having improved standards over the past three to five years. The overall sample contained a variety of different schools: 29 were high schools, 9 were selective grammar schools. Within the overall sample 5 were boys' schools, 4 were girls' schools and 29 were mixed. Despite being drawn from a relatively small geographical area, the schools in the sample represented varied social and economic areas. In total 61 subject leaders were identified across the three authorities.

Each subject leader was sent questionnaires that asked some basic information about their department. They were also asked to make a series of judgements about certain aspects of their work using a rating scale. These aspects were defined from current writing on subject leaders' practice in secondary schools.

Of the 61 questionnaires sent to the relevant subject leaders, 40 replied; 27 from Kent, 7 from Sutton and 6 from Bromley. In an attempt to encourage a high response rate, the questionnaires were designed to take minimum time to complete and focused on information that the subject leaders would have readily to hand. The main part of the questionnaire was to determine their attitudes towards various aspects of their work that were easy to represent on a 1-10 scale.

Subsequently, four focus groups took place during July 2005 attended by a total of 18 subject leaders from the sample of 40 who completed questionnaires, representing those who could commit to attendance on the dates set. Each focus group lasted two hours.

Findings and conclusions from the questionnaires

Overall, the average responses from the questionnaires show that the following areas were seen as being the most significant in raising standards:

- the organisation of schemes of work in the respective curriculum
- monitoring and evaluation
- having a specialist team to deliver the curriculum
- the opportunity to bring the team together to plan.

These were all factors over which the subject leaders had some influence. The subject leaders who subsequently attended the focus groups generally supported these areas as being essential in their work. If we use some of the findings from the NCSL's (2004a) research on learning-centred leadership, the organisation of schemes of work, team planning and monitoring all fall under the heading of systems and structures. These systems and structures are tools that subject leaders can use to indirectly influence the actions of individual teachers. The need for team planning, meetings, designated INSET and informal discussions reflect the need for individuals in teams to be able to communicate with each other and develop a corporate understanding of their teaching activity. Teaching can be a fragmented and solitary experience for teachers in secondary schools and the systems and structures referred to here suggest that these successful subject leaders recognise these as ways of making this experience more coherent and team orientated.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, the issue of recruitment and retention was ranked quite lowly (8th out of 10). When these issues were discussed in the focus groups, it assumed a much greater importance and was directly linked to the need to develop specialist teams in delivering a particular curriculum area. There are a number of reasons why this discrepancy appeared. The sample that constituted the focus groups was made up of individuals who ranked recruitment and retention highly. It could be that those subject leaders who did not rank this area highly did not have to deal with the issue of high staff turnover. Those that had might have developed strategies to minimise its impact and sustain improvements in attainment. Having specialists within teams was seen as being crucial from the questionnaire data and was a dominant theme of discussion in the focus groups.

The results from the questionnaire indicated that these subject leaders valued having time with their teams. They also tended to value department-based INSET (mean of 6.98) above whole school INSET (4.2) and INSET from external (5.98) providers. Broadly, these results suggest that these successful subject leaders valued the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge areas within their teams. Taken on their own, these results imply that the usefulness of expertise that resides outside the team is seen as having less impact and less relevance than department-generated INSET. Taken with results from other parts of the survey, those related to INSET might lead to the conclusion that these subject leaders valued processes that allowed them to create a climate of dialogue and sharing with professionals that held similar values. In addition, these results also suggest, in an implicit way, the need for curriculum teams to become self-supporting learning communities.

The high value placed on monitoring and evaluation also implies that these subject leaders were comfortable in tracking the work of their teams. In fact, those that attended the focus group all stressed the need to keep track of the department's work on a

regular basis. The ways that they achieved this will be discussed in more detail later. However, it is worth noting at this point that recent research has highlighted monitoring and evaluation as making a significant contribution to influencing and changing practice within classrooms:

Leadership is stronger and more effective when it is informed by data on pupils' learning, progress and achievements as well as by direct knowledge of teaching practices and classroom dynamics. (NCSL 2004a, *How Leaders Influence What Happens in Classrooms*, p 7)

Within the context of this study, monitoring and evaluation appeared as an important 'climate control' tool used by these subject leaders to focus their work and support them in making informed and rational decisions about change.

Finally, the support of leadership groups (mean 5.65) and the impact of performance management (4.8) were two of the least valued influences on these subject leaders' work. If these two elements are viewed together and compared with higher valued influences, one characteristic that seems to explain their relative unimportance is that of proximity to the actual business of teaching and learning and running a department. Using the data from the questionnaires alone, the support of leadership groups and the impact of performance management are perceived as being external factors and influences not totally in the direct control of the subject leader.

Comments in the focus groups highlighted the tensions that can exist between middle level leaders and school leadership groups. At times, it appears that subject leaders and senior school leaders operate from different agendas. One example of this is in the area of recruitment. Several subject leaders expressed frustration at not being able to recruit specialist teachers because of the need to balance the budget or save money by deploying existing staff in areas outside their specialism. While the subject leaders were understanding about the need to balance budgets, they felt that leadership teams were not truly appreciative of the need to develop specialist teams. Others commented on coping with initiative overload, where school-activated initiatives created pressures on teams and diverted their focus from the main job in hand, teaching and learning.

Another area that the questionnaire focused on was the management structure within departments. Of the 40 questionnaires returned, 29 recorded that there were other members within their department who had official positions of responsibility. Of these 29, 23 had a designated second in department. Larger departments often had a member of the team with responsibility to manage a particular key stage. The core subject departments of English, Maths and Science have critical teaching loads as they contribute to public examination results at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. The data gathered from the questionnaires reflects that the diverse nature of teaching commitments these subject areas undertake is reflected in multilayered management structures. It could be argued that, in each subject, each key stage represents a specialist area that requires specialist leadership.

Large teams require large amounts of time devoted to coordinating and organising their work. The results from the questionnaire show that the subject leaders require support from other managers in the department. Most would find it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the large range of administrative and developmental tasks required to run a department on their own. Also, the presence of the second in department implies that larger teams build in a developmental element in delegating responsibilities. Second in departments are often 'groomed' to take over from the subject leader if that leader

moves to a more senior position. Conversely, the second in department may leave to run a department in another school.

There is, however, a distinct difference between management and leadership. The data from the survey did not reveal whether there existed examples of distributed leadership. Although this concept is currently gaining more understanding among school leaders, the members of the focus groups were largely unaware of what the term actually meant. Most thought it was a form of delegation and sharing of responsibilities. Although the questionnaire did not address the concept of distributed leadership per se, the members of the focus groups did encourage their teams to take responsibility for developing a certain element of curriculum practice. All the subject leaders in the focus groups welcomed and encouraged individual members of the team developing new ideas, experimenting with certain teaching strategies and finding solutions to common problems. This is one of many aspects of developing distributed leadership within teams.

Findings from the focus group meetings

One of the key characteristics of the majority of subject leaders is that they were long-term occupants of their posts. The response to questionnaires showed that the number of years in post was, on average, five years or more. This length of time appears significant as all the subject leaders who responded to the questionnaires and attended the focus groups unequivocally stated that developing a stable team of well-trained specialists was the most crucial factor in sustaining improvement. In all the focus groups, regardless of background, the subject leaders valued leading committed specialist teachers. For all, this appeared to be the foundation of their success. In the case of these subject leaders, the long-term occupancy of their posts appeared to be a critical factor around which a successful team could be developed. It is clear that the long-term view and vision of these subject leaders became a source from which other aspects of good practice developed.

The following aspects are explored below in turn:

1. Recruitment and retention
2. Stability and the development of ethos
3. Developing dialogue and building relationships
4. Walking the job and reality checks
5. Importance of monitoring and evaluation
6. Building capacity
7. Role of INSET
8. Preparing students for public examinations
9. Impact of lesson observations
10. Knowing how the students are performing: using assessment data
11. What do you do when things aren't going well?
12. Student groupings: creating an environment for success
13. Road to success: a journey not a destination
14. More to life than public examinations
15. Leadership groups

1. Recruitment and retention

Many had made it an aim to influence their respective leadership groups to recruit specialists and to identify staffing needs early in the school year to ensure that they could recruit from high quality fields. They also negotiated rigorously to reduce the number of non-specialists teaching in their teams. All those who attended the focus groups stressed the need to be fully involved in the recruitment process. One influential way of recruiting well-qualified teachers was to support the training of new teachers through a variety of schemes. A number of departments had well-established links with university schools of education and graduate teacher programmes (GTPs). These links allowed these departments to train and potentially recruit talented teachers.

The subject leaders who had developed links with training institutions commented that they could influence the development of a new teacher before they started teaching full time. Therefore, working with a newly qualified teacher (NQT)/GTP teacher allowed the department a period of time to induct a new member of the team. Also, these subject leaders were enthusiastic to emphasise the beneficial aspects of being committed to training new teachers. They stated the focus on effective teaching and learning that training a new teacher required of them was stimulating and helped to keep their own

practice alive and fresh. Also, being linked to a training institution helped them keep in touch with new ideas and research that informed their practice.

On a practical level this supported sustaining quality provision when staff left. Many subject leaders felt that recruiting from national and local adverts, although necessary, was something of a lottery. They also commented that inducting and 'bedding down' new team members took a great deal of energy and time. Those who had had to deal with some changes in staff commented on the need to support new members of staff, even if they were experienced teachers. Some commented that supporting a number of new staff at one time changed the way they led their teams. They commented on the need to reinforce aspects of department ethos and to provide clear and easy to follow schemes of work. They also suggested that innovation and development was less likely to occur when staff were new to a school and that teachers' appetite for experimentation and risk taking increased with being in post for a sustained period. They also felt that having to lead unstable and non-specialist teams dramatically changed the way in which they operated. When leading a team of non-specialists and short-term occupants, these subject leaders felt they were involved in maintenance rather than development-oriented leadership.

2. Stability and the development of ethos

All those subject leaders who attended the focus groups felt that creating a stable team allowed for developing coherent and meaningful long-term plans. Many cited the need to develop a strong department ethos that was very difficult to achieve when the department was subject to a constant turnover of staff. This also applied to having non-specialist teachers who, they felt, did not develop the same sense of ownership of the curriculum as full-time, long-serving members.

It is in the area of recruitment and retention that the leadership group of a school can be at its most supportive. One head of Science cited the policy of his headteacher to recruit good specialist teachers by paying enhanced salaries as essential in attracting high calibre staff to the department. In the same school, the headteacher operated a policy of retaining staff through providing additional points for taking on a whole school responsibility. The need for headteachers to be sympathetic to the staffing needs of these departments was seen as critical, as was the need to be proactive in recruiting.

3. Developing dialogue and building relationships

All these subject leaders cited the importance of developing open, honest and supportive working relationships based on trust and an appreciation of how demanding the nature of secondary classroom teaching is. As a natural consequence, they also valued developing a team ethos in their work and encouraging their teams to become learning communities.

When questioned regarding the strategies they used, the subject leaders used a variety of different approaches to stimulate dialogue and debate within their teams. One head of Science stated that official meeting time for departments is very limited in many secondary schools. His team had taken the decision to hold an informal lunchtime meeting for half an hour every week instead of meeting more formally once a term. Other subject leaders echoed this and many encouraged their teams to discuss their work informally during lunchtimes. In addition to this, one head of English encouraged members of his team to work in pairs to deliver certain parts of the curriculum. The same head of English also encouraged his team to visit each other's classrooms for short

periods of time simply to see what was going on. These visits were not perceived as formal observations and were underpinned by a principle of finding something positive to compliment their colleagues on. This particular subject leader set the example by doing this on a regular basis and felt that it was something that his team valued. The visits often prompted discussion and sharing of ideas; they also allowed the team to witness and solve common challenges.

4. Walking the job and reality checks

Most of the subject leaders interviewed in the focus groups mentioned that “walking the job” was an important ingredient in keeping a “reality check” on the department. They felt that, if done regularly and in a supportive way, short regular trips around the department could help to identify problem areas before they became a crisis. They also attempted to touch base with the individuals in their teams at least once every day; this may have been once every two days in very large teams. One head of Maths felt that it was important to follow up on any problems that a team member faced to show support and that such actions built trust with the rest of the team. Brief discussions during breaks, lunchtimes and after school were valued ways in which subject leaders kept in touch with their team members on a daily basis and were considered vital to understand the different challenges and situations that the individual members of their teams were dealing with.

5. Importance of monitoring and evaluation

It appeared, in these departments, that monitoring and evaluation, developing the culture of the open classroom and establishing a shared vision and ethos were seen as contributors to and natural consequences of stability. Several subject leaders stressed the need to involve the team in the monitoring and evaluation of the department’s work as a way of building stability within their teams. In addition, developing a culture of ‘openness’ built trust between team members that supported the overall development of the team.

One head of English delegated the responsibility of a Year 8 department ‘book look’ to two teachers who did not have designated responsibility within the team. The work monitored included that of the subject leader and the other team members and its results were fed back to the rest of the department. This notion of peer monitoring was considered a very powerful agent of change and support encouraged by the subject leader providing a strong model of mutual accountability.

The subject leaders who had encouraged their teams to develop in this way felt that the comments and observations of peers was often more meaningful and useful than those of leadership teams or external observations. The reason for this was the shared knowledge of the context of the students. Put simply, colleagues working in the same department were felt to recognise the ability profile of the students better than external observers and they appreciated the students’ background. Colleagues knew the challenging students, the underachievers or those who were making progress because they may have taught them.

In addition, peer observation within departments meant that another specialist was observing rather than someone who might not have such a developed understanding of the subject. Both these factors led to what were considered to be more meaningful and supportive comments being made than in more formal observation scenarios. Peer

observation often allowed the teachers involved to share common challenges and successes reducing an individual's feeling of isolation.

A natural consequence of regular monitoring and evaluation was the subject leaders' development of an increased understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of individual team players. This was seen as being important because it helped them in their deployment of individual teachers in areas where they were more likely to succeed and gave them a clearer idea of how they could support colleagues.

6. Building capacity

Although secondary school teachers are trained as specialists in a subject, they have to develop a substantial range of skills. One head of English stated that understanding the different strengths of her team was vital in developing a successful team. In this instance, the school had employed an English teacher who had been primary trained. The subject leader recognised that this teacher possessed more skill in dealing with lower ability students in Key Stage 3 than she did. Therefore, initially, she deployed this teacher more in Key Stage 3 and observed her teach with a view to learning from her. The teacher concerned, who felt less confident in teaching some aspects of the Key Stage 4 curriculum, was given the opportunity to observe the subject leader teach GCSE classes as a means of developing her practice. The same subject leader also encouraged her department to observe others who were developing particularly innovative ideas. For example, she was aware that one member of her team was teaching poetic techniques by using poems written in foreign languages – she explained that she had observed this teacher using a poem written in Danish to focus the students' attention on rhythm and rhyme.

A number of points can be made from this particular example. First, this subject leader embraced the idea that her team may exhibit talents in particular areas and used these strengths to develop the expertise of the whole department. As well as spreading good practice, recognising what people are good at is a powerful way of motivating them to contribute to the work of the team and builds confidence and self-esteem.

Second, the subject leader could make use of the expertise in her department because she had observed them teach and knew their work. Again, the mere fact of recognising and knowing that someone has expertise in a particular area helps bring groups of individuals together to work as a team. In teaching, we often give students the opportunity of developing 'the mantle of the expert' to help them develop confidence and self-esteem, and this was a way in which such practice was transferred to the team members.

Finally, this subject leader was using her team as a resource. Providing the opportunity for colleagues to observe a peer delivering some aspect of the curriculum in an expert and skilful manner was seen as an effective use of internal human resources for professional development purposes and potentially more efficient than spending money buying in expertise from elsewhere.

This idea of allowing teams to teach each other was used by a head of Maths in a slightly different way. He would begin each department meeting by inviting different team members who were working on, and enthusiastic about, an area of the curriculum to teach the whole team. This particular subject leader felt that this was a powerful idea because it placed the whole team in the position of learners and therefore helped them empathise with the daily situation of their students. He also felt that these sessions then

stimulated further discussion on teaching and learning. A head of Science always started his department meetings by asking his colleagues what good teaching idea they had learned from another member of the team. Again, by deliberating placing teaching as a focus in department meetings, both subject leaders were placing the need to develop practice in the forefront of the agenda. In addition, they were encouraging their teams to become self-supporting learning communities by recognising the expertise of other colleagues within the department.

7. Role of INSET

Overall, whole school INSET was valued far less than team members attending INSET from external providers. Many of the subject leaders commented on the difficulty of delivering INSET that met the needs of such a diverse group of teams and individuals. The range of comments suggests that leadership groups might need to evaluate how they use INSET days. At one extreme, a number of subject leaders felt that whole school INSET was ill-used time as the topics covered did not match their teams' priorities. In addition it was considered that in some situations whole school INSET was perceived to be a way of addressing underperformance. The subject leaders also observed that issues addressed in whole school INSET were not always followed up, particularly those addressed at the beginning of the academic year. It appears that most teams naturally gravitated towards becoming involved in INSET activities that would have a direct and immediate impact on their classroom practice. Other comments implied that there were a number of developmental agendas running within schools at any one time and that some leadership groups could be accused of jumping on the latest educational bandwagon rather than focusing on supporting the reality of the schools' immediate situation.

One good example of this was the recent promotion of different teaching and learning styles. On the whole, the results from the questionnaire and the comments in the focus groups showed that this realm of educational practice had some but not significant impact on raising standards in their respective curriculum areas. The majority stated that they did use a variety of teaching strategies to maintain motivation and interest but had not adopted the kinaesthetic, auditory and visual paradigm wholesale.

Most of the participants were open to thinking about new theories of teaching and learning simply as a method of adding new skills to their toolkits. Finally, these subject leaders felt they had to filter and act as intermediaries when dealing with initiatives emanating from leadership groups. In general, most of the subject leaders had some sympathy with leadership groups that had to initiate government-led changes. In these cases, they adopted a 'we're all in this together, we just have to get on with it' approach. However, for initiatives that were promoted by leadership groups they tended to take measures that minimised disruption to their teams' work and primary focus, unless the whole team felt the initiative worthwhile to adopt.

A number of subject leaders valued the INSET provided by the examination boards and the experience of being examiners. The need to understand the demands of examination syllabuses was posted as one of the major factors for raising attainment. Those subject leaders who had either themselves been examiners or had members of their team being examiners, stated that the experience allowed for a more informed and specific delivery of a syllabus. This group observed that being an examiner allowed teachers to get inside the perspective of examiners and to understand how the assessment objectives of a syllabus were interpreted.

This process was particularly valued by English teachers where the assessment criteria are applied on a 'best fit' principle and are open to a degree of interpretation. In addition, the need for teachers to be Key Stage 3 examiners was also valued more from the view that the interpretation of assessment criteria shifted gradually from year to year. Again, those who worked in English departments were the strongest advocates of this as they felt it was important to gain an insider's view on how test papers would be marked. It is not surprising that input from examination boards was valued so highly as the information provided was focused and relevant to the key area for raising attainment, preparing students for public examinations.

8. Preparing students for public examinations

All the subject leaders who attended the focus groups and many who responded to the questionnaire stated the vital importance of preparing students for public examinations. Their attitudes were pragmatic and realistic in this area and their comments reflected that their public examination results were placed under greater scrutiny at school and local authority level. The majority of those in the focus groups spent considerable time in analysing examination results. Most analysed how students had performed on specific areas of examination and adjusted the focus of their teams' work accordingly. For example, one head of English recognised that Year 9 students were not performing as well in the Key Stage 3 writing paper as they did in the reading paper. This triggered department INSET and provided a focus for department meetings through the year; it also provided a clear improvement agenda for the team. This particular head of English followed up this analysis with regular monitoring of Year 9 work.

All the subject leaders used the breakdown of marks provided by the board as a way of recognising strengths and weaknesses in their teams' delivery. Some, but not all, also analysed the results by group and teacher. Those that did felt it was important to monitor how individual classes and teachers were performing. Again, the findings were used to provide support for individual teachers and allowed subject leaders a focus for their own monitoring. Analysing and evaluating performance in this way was viewed as a preventive measure rather than a punitive one. Subject leaders generally discussed examination results with their team as a whole and then individually. In general, these discussions were positive and subject leaders used other monitoring procedures to ensure that problematic areas were addressed at an early stage and did not develop into major issues. It was stressed, in this context, that allowing the team to work together and spread good practice developed those teachers who needed support.

9. Impact of lesson observations

Subject leaders felt that the lesson observations that occurred as part of performance management were useful for a number of reasons. First, everyone had to be observed, including the subject leader, and it was therefore seen as an all-embracing, equitable process. Second, it allowed members of the team to prepare a 'showcase' lesson where they could really display their strengths. Finally, the lesson observation records would be used as evidence to support applications to upper pay scales and therefore provided a valuable external motivation for individuals. In contrast, other subject leaders perceived performance management to be a process that simply had to be completed. Those who were most sceptical about the process also questioned the value of lesson observations as they felt they did not always reflect the daily reality; in these cases they felt that peer observation and informal visits were more useful in building a picture of the daily quality of teaching.

Where lesson observations indicated underperformance, subject leaders generally felt able to address such issues if they arose. They did not always feel particularly comfortable in doing so but they would initially address these issues on a personal level with the teacher concerned. Many felt directly responsible for the performance of those in their teams and considered it important to be supportive and humane when dealing with colleagues who might be facing challenges. In some cases, the culture that surrounded performance management in a particular school was seen as being unsupportive of the actions they may need to take in these situations.

Many subject leaders identified the positive impact that peer observation had made in sharing good practice and as a tool to develop individuals within their department. Subject leaders stated that peer observations were set up using different expectations and parameters. It was perceived that peer observations centred less around absolute judgements such as 'Excellent', 'Good' and 'Satisfactory' and more about sharing practice and offering mutual support. In addition, the associated agendas of peer observation were based on common concerns and interests within a team. Subject leaders remarked that peer observations drew on a deep well of shared understanding about students and the challenges of teaching a particular subject that some performance management observations could not always achieve. In '6. Building capacity', the example of the English subject leader knowing the relative strengths and weaknesses of their team prompted a programme of peer observation where the team observed models of good practice delivered by their colleagues. In this case, encouraging peer observation became a powerful vehicle for deep-seated teacher change.

Other subject leaders who had encouraged peer observation echoed this process. Also, subject leaders observed that change occurred more readily when a peer had successfully adapted or developed an aspect of teaching within the parameters of the subject area rather than being introduced by a perceived authority figure. It appears that the issue of relevance is a vital one and subject leaders often cited that they had observed that their teams were more open to new ideas when encouraged by 'rank and file' team members.

The subject leaders in the focus groups admitted that there were tensions in dealing with underperformance with colleagues who they might have close professional and personal relationships with. Some argued, however, that working closely with colleagues actually made addressing problems easier as individuals were more open when admitting to problems. Most believed that the way they led their departments, the support they gave to the individuals in their teams and the support given by the team to individuals within it helped to mitigate against underperformance by an individual.

Another criticism of the performance management system was the time-consuming nature of the whole process. Some felt that the process was not time effective in relation to the impact that it made on classroom practice and that the process tended to duplicate many aspects of their own monitoring.

10. Knowing how the students are performing: using assessment data

Establishing regular assessments and building a credible body of evidence about student attainment was seen as being a significant tool to raising attainment. The subject leaders in this study did recognise the value of prior attainment data but also placed great value on the evidence they gathered from their teams' work. Most were fairly positive about setting targets for students and agreed that they were valuable in

raising expectations of staff and students. Some felt that consistently good quality teaching raised standards more than setting targets.

Those subject leaders who were positive about target setting focused on the value of targets as a tool to raise the expectations of staff and identify underachievement. Several of these emphasised the importance of using prior assessment and targets to change the culture of a department. These subject leaders used target setting as a way of opening a dialogue with their teams about the ability profiles of the students. For example, some subject leaders used the process of target setting to discuss with their teams the learning priorities for a particular year. One head of English had identified that students were underachieving in their writing across the department – target grades were discussed as a means to discuss the potential of the students in relation to their current performance. In this case, the subject leader approached target setting with the team linked to a focused evaluation of one part of the team's performance.

Other subject leaders constructed ability profiles for individual year groups and asked their teams to comment on the validity of the profiles against teachers' knowledge of the students. This approach altered the perception of target setting as a 'top-down' performance management-related process to a more democratic way of establishing expectations for a particular group of students. In addition, the target-setting process was informed by internal assessment. All the subject leaders, regardless of their attitude towards targets, firmly believed that tracking student performance was a vital key to raising standards of attainment. What such systems show is a willingness by these subject leaders to maintain a strong grip on the reality of the department's work.

Where subject leaders expressed concerns about the use of targets, they suggested that they lacked ownership in the target-setting process. Often, they explained that a member of the leadership group set targets and the subject leaders felt that this was done in a rather arbitrary way following a formula that was not fully understood. In these cases, the subject leaders supported the target-setting process by having high expectations of all students regardless of prior attainment.

11. What do you do when things aren't going well?

One very noticeable characteristic of those interviewed was their willingness to tackle elements of their team's work that appeared to be restricting students' attainment. Examples of this include:

- changing to a different examination syllabus
- tracking students' coursework
- ensuring that all coursework was completed by examination groups
- introducing a core textbook to structure teaching in a specific key stage.

These actions were triggered by the performance of students in assessments and public examinations. In isolation, these actions might not appear particularly innovative or earth shattering. However, they all had significant effects on attainment. The one common characteristic of these initiatives is that they focused the teams' attention on key areas for improvement. All the subject leaders in the focus groups exhibited this ability to prioritise one or two key areas of improvement rather than aiming to change a multitude of things at once.

12. Student groupings: creating an environment for success

Many of the subject leaders also paid attention to creating and sustaining stable teacher/student relationships. In two out of four focus groups, subject leaders stated that they invested a significant amount of time in creating teaching groups and deciding who taught these groups. A considerable number felt that allowing teachers to stay with a group was beneficial as it allowed them to use their knowledge of students to good effect. They also described the positive impact that healthy long-term relationships between teacher and student can have on attainment. Being able to do this was a natural by-product of having a stable team. However, these subject leaders seemed willing to change this practice if an alternative approach would prove more beneficial for learners.

The majority of participants agreed that it was vital to have continuity at Key Stage 4 and they also attempted to minimise the number of groups that had to share a teacher. By contrast, a smaller but significant number of subject leaders felt it important to allow students to experience different teachers and therefore different teaching styles. The one principle that they seemed to follow universally was to create groups that could work and learn together.

Among the focus groups there was a mixture of views on whether students should be taught in mixed ability or ability groups. Heads of English expressed the greatest range of opinion with some advocating the benefits of mixed ability teaching very strongly, resisting the pressure from headteachers to create 'fast' groups. Others expressed some frustration at not being able to exert much influence on how the students were grouped. This occurred in situations where schools decided to band students in all subjects for the purposes of teaching. Some subject leaders stated that they still paid a great deal of attention to how the groups were constituted and all expressed very strong opinions about avoiding 'bottom' groups. The majority believed that creating workable groups was an essential aspect of developing a sustainable climate in their departments.

Where departments employed a policy of grouping by ability, subject leaders attempted to ensure that each member of the team taught groups of different ability levels. Gone are the days when the most senior members of the team could pick the groups they wanted. The same principle applied to allowing all members of the team to teach A level groups where the opportunity arose.

13. Road to success: a journey not a destination

One head of English described the process of raising attainment as "Going on a journey together". As well as striving to have stable and specialist teams, these leaders valued and rigorously negotiated to have time with their teams. This not only included regular department meetings but additional time during the academic year. Many leaders had established the need for their teams to spend extended time together to allow for developmental work to take place. These subject leaders had been given the opportunity to take their teams away from school sometimes for a whole day or afternoon to focus on some area of their delivery.

Those subject leaders who had negotiated significant department INSET time identified these sessions as critical to support the raising of attainment. In addition, these subject leaders tended to devote meeting time to discussion about teaching and learning and encouraged all members of their team to contribute ideas to team planning. For

example, one head of English explained that his team had been given an afternoon off timetable to prepare the delivery of material released by the examination board. The group focused on preparing lessons on a series of non-fiction articles that the students would be examined on. The GCSE results on this section of the examination, for this department, showed significant improvement over previous years. This area had required development and the sharing of expertise and ideas had been crucial in improving the quality of teaching in this part of the syllabus.

14. More to life than public examinations

Most of the subject leaders in this study agreed that a greater focus on examination preparation had improved standards. Although this pragmatic approach was seen as necessary, all the subject leaders who participated in this study also commented on the contribution of the impact of broader initiatives on raising standards. Subject leaders in English commented on the importance of encouraging private reading, using drama to develop confidence in speaking and listening and developing students as writers. In Science, subject leaders commented on the need to emphasise practical work and to develop an interest in problem solving as ways of engaging students in the core concepts of the subjects. In Maths, the subject leaders also commented on the need for focusing on problem solving and developing practical contexts for students to apply concepts that were fundamental to the success in the subject. In more general terms, the subject leaders expressed the importance of stimulating interest in their subject areas through running regular competitions and extra curricular activities. All subject leaders could cite examples of the benefits of their teams becoming involved in extra curricular activities such as Science and Maths clubs, school drama productions for English teachers and the development of school newspapers.

15. Leadership groups

Throughout this report, there have been several references to the impact that school leadership groups have on the work of departments. This may appear in some places rather critical but it is important to point out that the subject leaders who attended the focus group understood the difficult nature of whole school leadership, particularly in the area of recruitment. One area in which these subject leaders felt that leadership groups were critical was in taking time to understand the subject-specific challenges faced by their teams in raising attainment.

When subject leaders had described positive views of their school's leadership groups it was when the following had occurred:

- Regular contact with a line manager who had taken the time to know what was happening in a department and was able to offer solutions to some, but not all, of the challenges faced by their teams.
- Consultation and involvement of the subject leader in policy making, planning and the adoption of new initiatives.

In the area of recruitment, subject leaders were highly appreciative of headteachers who had supported the development of specialist and stable teams. This had, at times, meant the awarding of retention points and the creation of specific areas of responsibility for specific staff.

Conclusions

The evidence from this study suggests that there are some key characteristics that successful subject leaders show. The stability that they provide their teams by establishing a long-term vision and foundation on which trusting, professional relationships can develop, appears to be critical. Similarly, a significant attribute of all the subject leaders who attended the focus groups was that they got a grip of the reality of their teams' work. They achieved this by various means: creating accurate student tracking systems; monitoring and evaluating; observing lessons; and interacting with their teams. None of the subject leaders *assumed* that they knew what was happening in their teams; they sought to find out the truth. Lastly, they all exhibited the ability to confront a problematic situation and take action to change it.

The evidence presented from this research appears to support some of the main threads of recent research on subject leadership highlighted earlier. Certainly, the notion that successful teams develop as self-supporting learning communities is corroborated by the results of the questionnaires and the comments made in the focus group meetings; also, the need to invest time in relationships, both staff and student. However, creating stable and closely knit groups was not seen as a reason to become too cosy; most subject leaders felt that developing close working relationships with colleagues allowed for a greater degree of honest professional dialogue.

One area that this study did not address was the development of distributed leadership in large teams. This would be an interesting area for further study, particularly as the work of the NCSL becomes more widely known and adapted by school leaders. From the questionnaires sent out, many departments had formal positions of responsibility designated to support the subject leader.

However, the concept of distributed leadership does not rest in the formal granting of a title to an individual. Someone can occupy a position of responsibility and not be a leader. There were some indications that these subject leaders encouraged others to show leadership through allowing team members to work together or train other members of the team. How frequently they did this was difficult to ascertain; for many, it was an intuitive behaviour that arose through their own curiosity as learners.

For school leadership groups, the message is very clear. For subject areas to be successful, they need to be allowed to spend time together to address areas of need that they have defined. Many of the subject leaders felt that what they perceived to be the paucity of time their teams had together and the lack of freedom to set their own agendas for development were both limiting factors.

What appeared to characterise the subject leaders who attended the focus groups were their skills in blending and balancing. It emerged, during the focus group discussions, that this skill of blending and balancing could be added to others highlighted in the report as being influential in a subject leader's daily work. During the discussions it was clear that they blended many different actions together to influence the actions of the individuals in their teams. They also balanced educational ideals against the reality of achieving good examination results, and the essential activities within their teams with those that were seen as desirable from other groups. Most importantly, they all got to grips with the reality of their respective situations and sought to influence in a positive way.

Action points for subject leaders

Based on the comments made by the subject leaders the following might serve to be useful action points for others:

- Improvement is a journey not a destination.
- Be a leader by being proactive in your teams.
- Focus on a few critical areas to improve and develop; you cannot do it all at once.
- Monitor the work of your team, walk the job regularly.
- Get a grip of reality: what is really happening in your department?
- If something is not working, do something! Change what you are doing!
- Involve your team members in all aspects of the teams' work.
- Develop a clear ethos with the team.
- Analyse assessment data and examination results: what do you do well? What are the teams' areas of weaknesses?
- Recognise that each member of your team will be good at something, use their skills to teach others.
- Negotiate for time for the team to develop itself; make a case for time away from school.

Action points for leadership groups

From the data gathered as part of this research the following might be action points for school leadership groups:

- Know what the needs of a department are; regular contact via a line manager is vital.
- Aim to create stable and specialist teams; be creative in retaining good teachers.
- Listen to subject leaders about what they think their INSET needs are, then try and meet them.
- Do not jump on every initiative bandwagon that comes along.
- Create time for department teams to work together.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following colleagues who attended the focus group meetings:

Wendy Balmer	Maidstone Grammar School, Kent
Martin Brown	Hayes School, Kent
John Budden	Hayes School, Kent
Dr Arthur Darby	Ellington Girls' School, Ramsgate, Kent
Silas Edmonds	Wallington County Grammar School, Surrey
Jean Gazzet	Hayes School, Kent
Andy Gibbons	Stanley Park, High School, Surrey
Peter Hollingsworth	Willmington High School, Kent
Marie McLeish	Cheam High School, Surrey
Rob Middlecoat	Glenthorne High School, Surrey
Andrew Millar	Willmington High School, Kent
Colin Miller	Ravensbourne School, Kent
Lesley Nixon	Sittingbourne Community College, Kent
Graeme Poole	Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys, Kent
Elizabeth Ridout	Carlshalton High School for Girls, Surrey
Martin Tayler	Christ Church High School, Kent
Tony West	Hayes School, Kent

The following were instrumental in supporting this research:

Hugh Betterton, Sutton Local Education Authority (LEA) Inspectorate

Research and Statistics Department of Kent LEA and Bromley LEA

Kieran Osborne, Headteacher and the staff of Hayes School, Bromley, Kent, for providing the venue for the Bromley Focus Group

Michelle Coombs and the staff of Wrotham School for their support in my absence

David Day, Headteacher, Wrotham School, Kent

Louise McGettigan, for her secretarial skills

Molly Wright, for her patience

All colleagues who took the time to respond to the initial questionnaires

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